



**END OF YEAR STATEMENT TO THE
WEEKLY PRESS CONFERENCE
BY
PRIME MINISTER RT HON PHILIP DAVIS, QC, MP**

Thursday 30th December 2021

Ladies and Gentlemen, Good Morning!

I hope that you all had a wonderful Christmas.

I want to give special thanks to those who spent some of their holiday helping others. There is no better way to celebrate the gift of God's love.

My Friends:

Christmas Day marked exactly 100 Days in office for our New Day Administration, so I thought I'd share some thoughts this morning about our nation's progress navigating forward out of the health and economic crisis.

The good news is that there is plenty of light at the end of the tunnel. I am very optimistic about our ability not just to recover but to really thrive. We are determined to build economic growth that lifts all lives, and we are putting in place the foundation we need to get there.

The bad news is that we likely have a very difficult one or two months ahead of us.

As everyone knows by now, the two strains of COVID that are circulating, Delta and Omicron, are very, very contagious – Omicron even more so than Delta, which was already many times more transmissible than the original COVID virus strain.

I am in constant touch with our health team – I know you heard from them yesterday in a press conference – as we follow and examine data from around the world and use it to make the best policy decisions possible here.

As the virus changes, we need to stay flexible, and we need to stay in the fight together.

Our economic crisis has been so prolonged and so severe that I am not considering any serious shutdown of economic activity.

As I've said, many Bahamians are earning their first steady paychecks in a long time, many fragile small Bahamian-owned businesses are just starting to recover, and as a country we are taking important steps to economic recovery.

So blunt instruments like shutting our borders or prolonged, nationwide lockdowns are off the table.

Instead, our COVID policy is focused on giving Bahamians support to reduce their risks and on expanding our hospital capacity to accommodate any increase in hospitalizations.

The distribution of medical-grade masks to the Bahamian people begins today. Wearing these masks properly is one of the most effective ways to reduce transmission of this virus. These masks protect both the person wearing the mask and others near that person. NEMA is beginning today to distribute these masks to clinics and to vaccine sites, under the able leadership of Captain Russell Ms Gayle Moncur and Petty Officer Ingraham. I want to thank them for springing into action and helping us get these protective masks to people. Wider distribution will continue in the days to come.

If you've had COVID in the past, but you are not vaccinated, please know that prior infection is not protection against the Omicron variant – you can become reinfected and you can transmit the virus.

Countries are recording record numbers of confirmed COVID cases every day. Yesterday, the United States recorded more than 480,000 new cases in one day – and this is an undercount of the true number of cases.

Omicron is so transmissible that nearly all of us are likely to be exposed to the virus in the coming weeks and months.

And the question is – how ready will your body be to fight off the virus?

If you are vaccinated, and especially if you are vaccinated and boosted, you have given yourself an excellent chance at experiencing the virus as an inconvenience instead of as a severe disease.

Yesterday, the CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said that individuals who are not vaccinated are 10 times more likely to contract the virus and 20 times more likely to die from COVID.

I am encouraged to see many Bahamians continue to sign up to be vaccinated. By now, more than 8 billion people worldwide have been vaccinated.

I said earlier that we're all in this together. That means we need to do our best, even during this festive season, to protect each other. Some people have diseases or take medication that does not allow them to build strong immunity to the disease, even when vaccinated. We do not yet have pediatric vaccines in the country. There is no approved vaccine yet for children younger than five years old. These are the people I want you to think about when you make your New Year's celebration plans.

The situation here has changed quickly, so that what was safe even last week is no longer safe.

As you know, we have limited the size of gatherings to reduce the risks of superspreading events. We also decided not to permit the Carnival to operate, a decision many of us agonized over – because our children have had a very tough few years and deserve some special fun.

A lot of Bahamians have asked why the big hotel properties are allowed to have outdoor New Year's Eve events.

These questions are more than fair, and indeed, I share the frustrations and concerns.

Our health protocols are designed to reduce transmission risk while still supporting economic activity. Often, those twin goals are in contradiction with each other. It's not an easy balancing act, and you may think we get some of these decisions wrong. But the primary health goal is to slow transmission among Bahamians, to protect our people, and to protect our hospitals from the coming onslaught of cases.

With that in mind, we are asking the hotels to take steps to protect Bahamian staff, and we are asking Bahamians to reconsider attending these events.

These hotels are full – and their guests are going to socialize on New Year’s Eve. It may be safer to be outside at a concert instead of inside at bars, nightclubs, and the casino. I hope that is the case – I don’t want *anyone* to get sick in The Bahamas.

This is the world we live in now -- full hotels are fantastic news for our economy, but bringing people together increases risks.

One of the most regrettable consequences is the need now to delay the re-opening of schools. I am pleased to report that work on getting the buildings ready for the return of students and staff has been almost full-time in recent weeks.

Most of the premises are ready.

But the two-week delay will allow those returning from abroad sufficient time to quarantine, and thereby help to keep our school communities Covid-free.

The loss in face-to-face education has been one of the biggest casualties of the pandemic, and we must make every effort to ensure that students are not left behind in fulfilling their potential.

We can see from the different approaches adopted by different countries around the world that there’s no single answer to living through this time.

But we believe that all the available evidence supports our approach balancing the health and economic interests of the country.

I spoke before about the distribution – which will be nationwide – of medical-grade masks.

We are also going to get larger-scale free testing off the ground, beginning in New Providence, which we will also expand nationwide as quickly as possible.

Our pilot free testing programmes in the Family Islands taught us a lot about how to make the logistics work.

We know Bahamians have struggled with the cost of testing, and we don’t think knowing your health status should depend on your income.

We will also be rolling out a public education campaign so that Bahamians can get answers to their questions about masks, the virus, the vaccines, and testing.

If you have cold or flu symptoms, or if you know you have been exposed to someone who has COVID, please get tested, and do not go to work or gather with others until you have your test result.

In addition, as a reminder – advice that applies to everyone includes:

- Outside is always safer than inside; limit your time indoors to whatever extent is possible.
- When you’re inside – open as many windows and doors as you can, to reduce the number of virus particles in the air.
- Wear your masks. Double-mask until you have a medical-grade mask.
- If you are vaccinated, get your booster shot.
- If you are unvaccinated, you are at serious risk – please do what billions have done safely worldwide and get vaccinated.

I want to turn to some other issues now.

You may recall that in the Speech From The Throne, my administration proposed our Agenda For Change.

We promised solutions to Rebuild, Recover and Revolutionize our Bahamas.

In these first 100 days, we have reduced VAT to 10%, a change that will take place in two days' time. We have seen an enormous rebound in our number one industry.

We have eliminated the burden of the travel visa for Bahamians.

We ended the Competent Authority, which was just another name for Rule by One Man.

We ended curfews – and in the months that followed, restaurants and other businesses began to prosper, and our COVID case numbers went down.

We have also moved quickly to end a number of contractual obligations that were a very bad deal for the Bahamian people.

All Bahamians will feel the benefit of reduced VAT immediately.

You will have a little more money in your pocket, and when you spend that money, the government will make up the revenue which would otherwise have been lost by the rate cut.

This is what dozens of other countries have done during the pandemic.

We want Bahamians to receive the same benefit.

In addition, we have enhanced social assistance to the most vulnerable in our society, and in the past two weeks, workers and pensioners received the cash payments we promised to provide.

We have made other changes as well, in accordance with our New Day values.

Take today: this Weekly Press Conference which began during our second week in government.

Our Press Secretary and Director of Communications have introduced many Ministers and other public officials, who have given full and detailed briefings on matters of national importance.

We decided that not only could the briefings give the press access to officials and to answers about public policy, but we could simultaneously promote local food businesses by featuring one at each briefing.

I would like to express my personal thanks to my Press Secretary, Mr. Clint Watson, my Director of Communications, Mr. Latrae Rahming, my Speechwriter and Communications Advisor, Mr. Ian Poitier, and my Director of Operations, Ms Allison Collie, and their teams, for the work they have done and their commitment to serving the people.

Within these first 100 days, we have also taken significant steps to restore our presence on the international stage.

We recognise how important it is to give investors and international lenders confidence that The Bahamas is in good hands and heading in the right direction.

My address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, delivered a week after I received the Instruments of Office, was well-received, especially among our CARICOM neighbours who celebrated the return of The Bahamas to the table.

The impact of my statement to the Plenary Session of World Leaders at the COP 26 Meeting on Climate Change in Glasgow, was such that new partnerships, new alliances, a new profile and a new confidence emerged among national and industrial leaders.

Bahamians can be proud that our small little country is batting far above its weight on the international stage!

My Friends:

The health crisis and the economic crisis that we met on coming into office are still with us.
Far too many Bahamians are still hurting.
We have an enormous amount of work ahead of us.

In the New Year, I will address the country to say more about our plans going forward.

If you haven't had a chance as yet to read it, please have a look at our Blueprint for Change.

It is a roadmap for how we plan to move the country forward.

We want Bahamians to become familiar with it, so they are equipped to engage with us, and to interrogate the policies, to help us get it right.

Thank you, God Bless You, and I pray that you have a Happy and Prosperous New Year.

I will now take any questions that you have for me.

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